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ABSTRACT

The Grant Wood Area Education Agency (GWAEA) is a regional education service agency centered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, serving 39 public school districts and 36 private school districts in a seven-county area. Area education agencies (AEA) in Iowa are separate legal entities, not arms of the State Department or the school districts who decide to join them. The purposes of AEA are to equalize educational opportunities across a regional geographic area. This is accomplished by providing educational services, media services, and special education services to local school districts that cannot afford to provide these services for themselves. Funding for the GWAEA ultimately comes from local district property taxes and is computed on the basis of district enrollment. Approximately 80% of the budget goes to special education, 7% to media, and 12% to educational services. Educational services include inservice, data processing, and research programs. The inservice program provides consultants in the content areas of science, language arts, math, and social studies. The research program provides needs assessment, evaluation studies, grant writing, test scoring and reporting, etc. Since services are not mandatory, requests to the GWAEA are treated on a first-come, first-serve basis. (RL)

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# RESEARCH AND EVALUATION AT THE GRANT WOOD AREA EDUCATION AGENCY: A REGIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE AGENCY'S PERSPECTIVE

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The Grant Wood Area Education Agency is a regional education service agency centered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, serving 39 public school districts and 36 private school districts in a seven-county area. Studies of regional education service agencies conducted by the Stephens Associates and sponsored by the Northern American Association of Educational Service Agencies defines area education agencies in the State of Iowa as "special district education service agencies." This means that area education agencies in Iowa are separate legal entities; rather than arms of the State Department, or educational cooperatives that exist at the pleasure of the school districts who decide to join them.

The scope of intermediate service units varies from state to state. Some are a part of the total state education system, complete with regulatory powers and service responsibilities. Others provide only special education services or only a centralized media center. Still others are simply cooperative ventures of two or more school districts, pooling their resources rather than bearing the expense of programs and services alone.

The purposes of area education agencies in Iowa are essentially to equalize educational opportunities across a regional geographic area. This is accomplished by providing educational service, media service, and special education services to local school districts in the areas that schools cannot afford to provide by themselves. By doing so, the AEAs form a genuine partnership with the local districts that they serve.

The genesis of the AEAs in Iowa were the county units. In order to provide greater breadth of services more economically, the Iowa legislature passed permissive legislation in 1965 allowing these county units to merge into multiple-county units and to be administered by one Superintendent. These voluntary multiple-county units existed from 1965 to 1975 and were called Joint County School Systems. The Joint County System was the forerunner of the current Area Education Agency System. In 1975 the Iowa

legislature mandated that all districts in the state belong to an area education agency. There are 15 AEAs in the State of Iowa providing services to school districts ranging from 13 districts and 16,000 students to 63 districts and 121,000 students.

Fifteen states have formed educational service agencies or are in the process of forming them. Another 15 states have multi-purpose educational cooperatives or some other regional service arrangement. Behind educational service agencies is the fundamental premise that each child, regardless of ability, should have opportunities available for a sound educational program. The regional organization of these agencies offers programs and services to school districts that individual districts might not be able to provide as efficiently, or at all. Accordingly, all children are expected to be the chief beneficiaries of these services.

Programs and services of the AEAs are financed in a variety of ways, but the agencies themselves have no taxing authority nor fundraising capacity per se. Rather, funds are generated by local school districts through two sources:

1) property taxes, which are based on the district's cost per pupil and enrollment. Local budget growth, also referred to as allowable growth or state percent of growth, is based on property taxes assessed by local districts.
2) the Iowa school foundation aid program guarantees a basic financial support level by having all districts tax themselves at $5.40 per $1,000 assessed valuation and the state providing aid up to a basic level.

Some additional funds are generated by grants from foundations and the sale of services provided under contract. AEAs can apply for federal

funds acting as a sort of conduit to local school boards. New federal funds are likely to go to supply funds for educational needs of children which have not been met previously.

The funds for the AEA flow through the local school district budgeting process. From a purely bookkeeping standpoint, it is perhaps of some significance to note that the money for the AEA does not go by check from each local school district, but rather is sent by the State Comptroller through the DPI four times a year, and the liability for each district is deducted from their state aid payments. It is merely a device to simplify accounting procedures. These funds are not part of the regular program per pupil cost of local school districts.

The Research and Evaluation Program at the Grant Wood Area Education Agency is organized in the Division of Educational Services. The Division of Educational Services receives the bulk of its revenue from state allowable growth, which is based on property tax assessment of local districts.

Since funding for Educational Services ultimately comes from local district property taxes and is computed on the basis of district enrollment, taxpayers in the districts with the largest school population must pay the greatest share to the AEA for research and other educational services. These larger districts receive greater revenues from property taxes to pay the AEA since the law allows each local district to levy taxes sufficient enough to support expenditures to the AEA. Seventy-eight percent of the research budget for 1980-81 comes from property tax, 11 percent comes from federal grants, and 11 percent from external receipts from sales of research services to other AEAs. The Research Program is approximately 7 percent of the total division of Educational Services budget and less than 1 percent of the total agency budget. The operational budget for 1980-81 is $123,000.

The legislation creating the area education agencies specified that the AEA Administrator serve under the direction of the AEA Board of Directors. The AEA Board is elected by local school district boards it represents. The AEAs provide programs and services through three major divisions: Special Education; Media; and Educational Services.

Division of Special Education is responsible for the identification of all children, birth to age 21, who need special education and for the assignment and certification of the appropriate weights for funding each child's special education programming. The division provides both instructional and support services.

The local schools, and in some instances the AEAs, employ resource teachers, "special class with integration" teachers, or "self-contained special classroom" teachers for children with disabilities, such as mental and physical disabilities, learning disabilities, speech and language impairment, emotional disabilities, etc. To support these instructional programs, the AEA provides support services which may include hearing clinicians, speech clinicians, school psychologists, special education program consultants, school social workers, etc.

The Division of Media Services supports the educational programs provided by the local schools with a variety of materials, media consultation, production capabilities, and technical assistance.

The AEA Media Centers are mandated to provide the following services:

1) A Materials Lending Library, containing films, books. and non-print media such as kits, film strips, records, models, and art prints.
2) A Professional Library for professional growth of educators.
3) A Curriculum Laboratory for the preview of current educational materials, including textbooks and

correlated print and audiovisual materials.

4) Production Services, offering capabilities for print and non-print production and reproduction.

5) A Delivery System for distribution of materials to and from local schools.

6) Consultative Services, providing assistance and inservice for teachers and local media specialists/ librarians.

Some AEA Media Centers also provide equipment maintenance and repair and access to various data and research information systems throughout the country.

The Division of Educational Services is the least restricted of the three divisions in the types of services and programs that it offers. Within the limits of available funding, this division may provide inservice for AEA and local school personnel, educational data processing, research, demonstration projects and models, and educational planning. It may also contract with other schools, agencies, or institutions for the use of personnel, facilities, or materials.

As mandated by law, all the area education agencies must conduct local district needs assessments and have local district advisory committees. Those services requested from local schools which do not relate to media or special education fall into the category of "educational services." Needs of local schools vary greatly from area to area, and within areas. Consequently, divisional offerings of educational services will differ from area to area.

At the Grant Wood Area Education Agency, approximately 80 percent of the agency budget goes to Special Education, 7 percent for Media, and 12 percent for Educational Services. The Educational Services Division has three programs: Inservice, Data Processing, and Research.

The Inservice Program provides consultants in the content areas such as science, language arts, math, and social studies. They also deal with curriculum expansion and enrichment, such as multi-cultural nonsexist education, gifted and talented, etc.; and in the instructional strategies of developmental learning, classroom management, mainstreaming, peer counseling, etc. Specific courses for staff development are also offered through this program. The Data Processing Program provides both instructional and financial services to school districts. Such services include payroll, financial, personnel, equipment inventory, school census, grade reporting, student scheduling, etc. Instructional data processing services are offered on the HP time share system as well as the new mini computers, which are now available to all school districts. The Research and Evaluation Program provides services in program evaluation, needs assessment, school and community survey studies, testing services, and enrollment studies. The testing services provide loan of test materials, computer test scoring, and report delivery for different types of standardized testing programs. Followup consulting on test interpretation is available as well.

Of the 15 area education agencies in the State of Iowa, ten of them have either formal research programs or programs that provide research functions. The types of services these units provide include needs assessment, evaluation studies, grant writing, test scoring and reporting, experimental projects, basic school research, studying and consulting on organizational processes, survey development and analysis, enrollment projections, inter-district sharing studies, and research dissemination. Nine out of ten units offer some kind of needs assessment service. Six out of the ten units offer evaluation studies, ranging anywhere from formal evaluations on federal projects to relatively simple student attitude

surveys. Four AEAs provide some kind of grant writing service, and four provide some kind of testing service. Research services are provided by the following kinds of programs: Research and Evaluation; Research and Development; Planning, Research, and Evaluation; Assessment, Evaluation, Research, and Planning; Curriculum Development; Consultant Services; and Administrative Support. The staffing configuration in these research units is relatively small. Four of the ten centers that have research functions only have one-half of a full time equivalent staff member. Three of the agencies have a full time staff member, one agency has two, and two agencies have three and one-half research staff members.

There are two full time staff members plus a program coordinator and a secretary in the Research Program at the Grant Wood AEA. Essentially, there are two arms of the Research Program: Testing and Evaluation Studies. In the area of testing, we provide four operational testing programs: standardized abilities testing service, a teacher-test analysis service, an abilities/achievement test comparative analysis, and criterion reference testing service. For these services we provide test materials such as booklets and answer sheets to schools. The booklets are provided on a loan basis. We provide computer scoring and analysis and reporting of the test results back to the districts. School districts are charged at the end of the year for the materials cost and the cost of data processing. Consultant followup services are an important aspect of our total testing services, and these are not charged back to the districts. Our testing consultant visits with groups and individuals to help them interpret the results of their standardized or teacher-made tests, how to build better tests, and how to use them for a variety of instructional purposes.

Last year we procured a study grant from NIE to do a comparative analysis of the diagnostic utility of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills compared to standardized tests designed specifically for diagnostic

purposes. That grant allowed us to develop a work sheet called the Skills Summary Sheet. The Skills Summary Sheet is designed to help students identify their specific strengths and weaknesses by skill area as measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. There are approximately 60 to 80 skill areas on each level of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Approximately 20 school districts and parochial schools in our area, involving approximately 1,000 students, used this diagnostic approach to interpreting the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills during 1980-81. The results of our study commissioned by NIE will be available in June.

The standardized abilities testing service utilizes the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT). We have decided to provide the CAT as an operational service, because it is standardized on the same population as the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills is the most frequently used achievement battery in Iowa. The abilities/achievement comparative analysis is called the 20th Percentile Program. The 20th Percentile Program identifies students scoring at or below the 20th percentile for each subskill of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills for their ability level as measured by the Cognitive Abilities Test. Essentially, therefore, this joint analysis evaluates the achievement test data on the basis of ability and de-emphasizes the grade equivalent comparison. By providing this comparison, counselors and teachers are able to determine who has abilities in a given area, yet did not score well in those areas. Learning disabilities, for example, can be easily detected through such an analysis.

Our teacher-test analysis service is essentially a test scoring service with the major purpose directed towards the improvement of teacher-test writing. Each test item is evaluated according to a norm

reference standard by computing discrimination and difficulty indices. Workshops are held to describe the meaning of this kind of test output, and follow-up workshops are provided for better test development for classroom use.

The criterion reference testing service utilizes the Individual Pupil Monitoring System published by the Houghton-Mifflin Company. This service is provided for reading and math in grades three through eight. Teachers can choose specific skill objectives which are measured by five items in the reading test and ten items in the math test. Mastery levels are identified by the teacher, and then item analysis is generated for more diagnostic evaluation of student achievement.

The evaluation arm of the Research Program at Grant Wood AEA consists of formal program evaluation studies, needs assessment studies, school survey studies, inter-district sharing studies, declining enrollment and school reorganization studies, and other data gathering and reporting services. Evaluation studies deal with formal third-party evaluations of funded projects, such as special gifted and talented programs, special alternative education programs, career education programs, etc. Evaluation work also deals with assessment of compulsory education programs such as evaluating the effects of new reading and math programs, an innovative science program, an evaluation of kindergarten scheduling, etc. Also included are survey services which help schools develop questionnaires, identify samples, collect data, and conduct and interpret the data analysis. We provide the technical expertise in conducting evaluations and surveys and provide interpretation of the data in formal reports and/or presentations to specific audiences in the district, including the Board of Education. In all cases our evaluation and survey reports are considered a service to the district and, therefore, are considered the

district's property. In no way are the recommendations from any of our studies considered to be required or mandatory. Forty-two specific evaluation and/or survey studies were conducted during the 1979-80 school year.

An example of a recently completed evaluation study is an Inter-District Sharing Study we conducted for two school districts in our area. This study was an outgrowth of a Declining Enrollment Task Force which was initiated at our agency in 1978. The recommendation from the task force was to conduct an inter-district sharing study for two districts who would serve as a pilot to the other districts on ways in which inter-district sharing can be beneficial in the general areas of programs, personnel, and facilities. Essentially, the study involved gathering priority ratings from teachers, administrators, board members, and community members in each of the two districts involved. Eighty-four prespecified sharing alternatives were rated by each respondent. Utility rankings were computed on the basis of these alternative ratings and five sharing attribute ratings. The five attributes that were rated were educational quality, cost effectiveness, implications for staff, community acceptance, and efficient facilities usage. Analysis of the utility rankings revealed that the most appealing sharing alternatives were shared programs in gifted and talented, building trades, alternative high school, and vocational agricultural and farm management. After the study was published and formally presented to administrators and board members, follow-up meetings were held with the superintendents to further interpret the data and identify strategies to address these recommendations. Instructional consultants at the Grant Wood AEA were available and used by these districts in implementation of these recommendations.

Enrollment data is provided for all public and parochial schools in our area each fall. This data is collected as of the official enrollment count date in September and is reported back to all districts in early October. Five-year enrollment projections are made from this data each year and is used for budgeting, scheduling, and building and planning.

Each fall the Research Department also conducts a state-wide study of staffing and wage comparisons for all staff members in each of the 443 school districts in the State of Iowa. Included in this report are not only administrative, instructional, and support staff information, but also information on transportation, building and maintenance, the hot lunch program, and summer programs. These reports are distributed to districts in late October and are used for negotiation purposes in November. Since AEAs can only serve their own districts, Grant Wood provides this service to other area education agencies on a contract basis. The AEAs in turn provide this service to their respective school districts.

Being a service agency we must be completely responsive to the needs of the local districts. In addition to this responsive mode of operation we must provide leadership in our area of expertise. This means that an emphasis is placed, at least in the Research Department, on finding new and innovative ways of delivering our testing and evaluation services. For example, we have pushed for a more diagnostic approach to test interpretation. So besides providing our operational testing services, we have provided inservice for teachers and administrators on the value of standardized testing for diagnostic purposes. By being proactive as well as reactive, we can develop an awareness of felt need within the districts. We, therefore, must juggle a service reactive mode of operation with a leadership proactive mode of operation.

Since the services that we provide are not mandatory in any way, the requests that we get from school districts are treated on a first-come, first-serve basis. We have established a priority system within our department because of the overwhelming number of requests that we get each year. Since we are established as a service agency for school districts, our first priority is to service those requests that come from local districts and place the secondary priority on those requests that come from within our organization. Input from the local districts is received primarily through our advisory group structure. The Division of Educational Services has an advisory council made up of 12 school superintendents. Three of these superintendents serve on the Research Advisory Committee as well. School principals, counselors, and teachers, including local district research personnel, also serve on the Research Advisory Committee to provide input on the kinds of services they feel we should provide. We meet twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring. The advisory group reacts to program priorities and program goals and services to be offered each year during the fall meeting. In the spring meeting the advisory group reacts to the quality of those services delivered during the year and provides input for the services and goals for the coming year.

Basically, the local school districts see the area education agency as an extension of their district. Usually our services are requested on an ad hoc need basis. Examples of this kind of relationship with local school districts are requests that we get for inservice with teachers on test interpretation and assistance in conducting community and staff surveys. The second kind of relationship that we have with local districts takes the form of a third-party, external, independent service organization. We sometimes provide an independent view of a district's operations by

conducting third-party evaluation studies. These are common when evaluating federal and state grants and by conducting studies involving multiple districts.

The purpose of AEA legislation was to equalize educational opportunities for all students on an area basis. Small schools, particularly, were not able to afford certain services that the larger school districts were able to provide their students. The area education agencies are chartered to provide those kinds of services evenly across the area. Research services are a good example. There is only one school district out of the 39 that we serve that provides research services for themselves. This district, Cedar Rapids, is the largest of our districts, representing approximately one-third of our total area enrollment. Through our awareness of the kinds of services that larger districts provide for themselves, we are able to communicate and provide similar services to smaller districts. Communication, therefore, is one great advantage of an intermediate agency, particularly in a research program. We are able to communicate all kinds of research problems and activities existing in other districts, learn from them, and provide that information on to those districts who are equally concerned. We are also able to identify experts in given areas in other districts and offer them as resources to other districts. By working in many districts with different kinds of programs and personalities, we are able to draw from varied experiences, thereby enriching the quality of our resources to the schools in our area. Also, the fact that we have a variety of curriculum experts on our AEA staff, including psychologists, speech clinicians, media specialists, data processing consultants, and the like, we are able to draw upon their expertise. Being an independent service agency we are able to pool ideas.

We are able to pool the ideas of the districts that we serve and pool the ideas of our own staff. Also, we provide a fresh perspective to school districts. Coming from the outside, not being involved in the specific operations of the school district, we are able to provide an independent viewpoint. Therefore, the greatest value in delivering research services on an area basis is in the ability to communicate and provide a variety of approaches and ideas. Secondly, we are able to deliver research services to school districts that would not be able to afford them without our existence.

Interestingly enough, some of the same reasons for our success in working with districts are also some of our biggest problems and frustrations. We deliver services on a request basis and, therefore, have only ad hoc kind of communications with those districts. We have great breadth of experience from which to draw upon to deliver our services but lack the depth because of our organizational independence from those districts. Also, there are political pressures that come from local districts that we must constantly deal with. Many of the districts, particularly the larger ones, feel that they don't get their money's worth in services from us. Because our funding flows from the taxpayers through local district budgets to the AEA, oftentimes we are viewed as an expense to the local districts. This results in a great deal of misunderstanding, not only on how we are funded, but on how we should operate our programs and plan our priorities. We do get into disagreements with local districts on where our priorities should lie and how they are established. Oftentimes local districts feel they lack control of the services we provide. We try to maintain a posture of service and of partnership with each individual local district; and still provide services beneficial to all districts.

We have received criticism in the last few years on our rapid growth. The legislature has been very permissive on our funding, yet they have been

very restrictive with local districts on the way they are funded. Local district budgets are tied to enrollment, which is declining at about 2 to 3 percent a year. Funding for Educational Services, which includes research, is not tied to enrollment.

One of the fears that local districts have always had of the AEAs is that they become bureaucratic and regulatory. Local districts are very concerned that we maintain a service posture to school districts and eliminate any regulatory responsibilities. Original legislation was purely service in nature, but additional legislation has given us more regulatory responsibilities. These regulatory responsibilities include such things as holding transportation appeals coming from local districts, holding hearings prior to local district bond issues, and conducting local district reorganization studies. Reorganization studies are the responsibility of the Research Department. We, however, have opted to provide a study that provides no recommendation for reorganization, since it is felt that reorganization is strictly a local district prerogative. School districts have the fear that a reorganization study might be construde as a mandate to put them out of existence and reorganize with another district.

A change that could possibly take place within our agency to approve the delivery of research services would be more integration with the curriculum consultants. We depend upon the curriculum consultants to learn of the research needs in the districts. Curriculum consultants, on the other hand, depend upon us to investigate the feasibility for new innovations and program revisions being considered by local districts. An example of a more integrated model using both research and curriculum experts might be something like the CIPP Model for evaluation and program decision making. Research assistance and research studies can be procured or conducted following a general CIPP Model approach for any kind of

curriculum change and innovation. Curriculum consultants should be trained to use such a model in their communication with districts, and research consultants should be brought in frequently to provide research information and/or studies to improve the kinds of curriculum decisions being addressed.

Formative evaluation should be stressed more than summative evaluation. Formative evaluation information must be mixed with ongoing curriculum changes and decision making. The need for formative evaluation is what curriculum consultants and research consultants have in common in working with schools.